

Chouki El Hamel. *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam.* African Studies Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 354 pp. \$34.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-65177-7.



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Chouki El Hamel's *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* is a valuable contribution to North African historiography and the study of slavery. In a field heavily weighted toward the history of Atlantic slavery in the Americas, El Hamel trains our attention squarely on Morocco, looking particularly closely at the creation of a large, racialized army under the rule of Mawlay Isma'il, who reigned from 1672 until 1727. This army looms large in the historical imagination of race and power in contemporary Morocco, and El Hamel's book considerably widens and deepens our understanding of Mawlay Isma'il's "project" while simultaneously challenging the notion that slavery in North Africa was benign. As a historian who has previously written about Muslim intellectual life in Mauritania and northern Mali in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, El Hamel is closely attuned to the intersections and tensions among Islamic learning, the trans-Saharan trade, the institution of slavery, and European colonial expansion. These scholarly skills and sensitivities help

make El Hamel's new book an important contribution not only to the study of slavery but also to the field of North African history, which has until recently paid little attention to trans-Saharan connections, and whose periodization has tended to treat the appearance of European colonial powers as a sharp historiographical boundary.

Black Morocco is divided into two parts. The paired chapters of part 1 consider slavery within the broad Islamic legal and moral framework, on the one hand, and, on the other, within a specifically North African and Moroccan context during the medieval and early modern periods. Chapter 1 examines legal and moral perspectives on slavery in the Qur'an, ḥadīth literature, and Sunni legal traditions. El Hamel argues that interpreters of Islamic law chose to accommodate existing institutions of slavery and concubinage, ignoring the Qur'an's counsel against such practices. In chapter 2, the author thinks broadly about notions of color, descent, and servitude in Arab-Islamic thought of the medieval and early modern periods. El Hamel points out longstanding continuities in

North African perceptions of racial difference and hierarchy, so that despite the enslavement of many different groups, and the possibility for the child of a male master and an enslaved woman to inherit or attain a high social status, "blackness" came to be associated with servitude. At the same time, he discusses the existence of non-enslaved, autochthonous black communities in Morocco.

Part 2 considers the "diaspora" of sub-Saharan Africans in North Africa in the early modern and modern periods. It begins with a chapter that traces the medieval roots of the slave trade to Morocco. Sub-Saharan Africans constituted a distinct category of captives that increased in size with the intensification of North African ties to West Africa through trade, conquest, and religious networks. The flow of captive West Africans into Morocco reached a peak with the conquest of the Songhay Empire at the end of the sixteenth century. Many of the Songhay captives were directed into the army of the ruling Sa'di dynasty and into southern Morocco's nascent sugar industry. This southern enslaved population would form the central pool for the 'Alawi dynasty's creation of a racialized army several generations later.

The three chapters that follow use a variety of European travelers' accounts and unpublished Arabic manuscripts to narrate the creation, functioning, and eventual dissolution of Mawlay Isma'il's social and military project. These chapters are the core of the book and its most original contribution. Chapter 4 treats Mawlay Isma'il's conscription of black Moroccans. This conscription, which began in the 1670s, was deeply controversial, in part because it often meant the enslavement of an established, non-slave Muslim population from within Morocco, and in part because it destabilized established relationships of clientage and servitude outside the royal circle. El Hamel deftly traces the debate regarding the legality of Mawlay Isma'il's actions, which brought the sultan into conflict with many of the country's leading religious scholars and in some cases end-

ed with black non-enslaved populations escaping conscription.

Chapter 5 focuses on the everyday life of the conscripted population, with an emphasis on the self-reproducing, all-encompassing aspects of this institution during Mawlay Isma'il's reign. El Hamel describes the life cycle of the conscripted population, including the separation of girls from boys and their education in crafts and services, boys' contributions to construction projects and their eventual integration into the army, and the sultan's role in pairing slaves for purposes of marriage and procreation. El Hamel vividly evokes the way in which this novel institution, inspired in part by the Ottoman Janissaries, constituted an internal military force dedicated to the suppression of the sultan's challengers. In this respect, it was highly significant that the conscripts came from situations in which they were largely not integrated within the kin relationships that tribes depended on, and had furthermore been removed from their home regions and from the social networks they shared with other Moroccans.

Chapter 6 tells the story of this military force after Mawlay Isma'il's reign. The immediate aftermath of the sultan's death confirms El Hamel's assertion that this force constituted the ruler's personal army: without payment, isolated, and in many cases raided by newly empowered tribes, some conscripts dispersed. Nevertheless, the "black army" did not disappear, instead becoming one important component in a shifting military apparatus that now drew on tribes as well. In this configuration, the "black army" came to play a role in the struggles over dynastic succession. Its fortunes very much depended on the interests of the ruler. In some instances, it was seen to be a political and economic liability, and its members dispersed. In other instances, particularly at the end of the eighteenth century, it came to play an important though nonexclusive role within the military apparatus. This section of the governmental structure was partly replenished with

newly enslaved West Africans in the nineteenth century, even as a sense of an original core dating to Mawlay Isma'il's reign remained.

The final two chapters of *Black Morocco* move away from the "black army" to consider the disappearance and afterlife of slavery in Moroccan society. Chapter 7 details the whittling away of domestic slavery under direct and indirect pressure from the European powers, with the institution gradually disappearing during the French Protectorate period. Chapter 8 looks at the collective memory of slavery among adherents of the musical and spiritual order of the Gnawa. El Hamel synthesizes much of the scholarly literature on the Gnawa, emphasizing their status as bearers of a subaltern memory of enslavement, slave trading, and their West African origins, and he enriches this discussion through interviews with a leading family in Moroccan Gnawa circles and through a philological exploration of the term "Gnawa."

Black Morocco offers us the most sustained and in-depth discussion of Mawlay Isma'il's army to date, and provides a solid overview of slavery in Morocco beyond this particular sultan's reign. El Hamel worked with some very rich, often previously untapped sources, but he also faced the difficult task of dealing with a lack of documents that might fill in our sense of slavery, freedom, labor, and social status outside the palace. At times, I suspect that El Hamel could have done more with what is available if he worked through his concepts of race, ethnicity, and status a bit more. For example, in a few passages, he describes early modern black Moroccans as "an economically underprivileged class," echoing Mawlay Isma'il's convenient treatment of them as an undifferentiated bloc (p. 159). There are also instances, such as El Hamel's discussion of some of the cultivators whom Mawlay Isma'il attempted to conscript, when the "free black" populations sound rather un-free, even before conscription. Then in other instances, such as Mawlay Isma'il's "black army,"

the notion of enslavement is complicated by the payment of wages. I suspect that some of the ambiguity of status that arises in various places in this work is connected to the question of naming, since here, as in some other contexts, "slave" and "black" came to be interchangeable. Some of this ambiguity in naming no doubt arises in turn from ambiguity in relationships of dependence, descent, and clientage, and militates for a conceptual vocabulary that can capture these subtleties. That being said, in most of the book, El Hamel embraces the complex, variegated situation that his sources tend to suggest, and it is wonderful to be able to raise these questions in the first place, which would simply not be possible without this book.

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